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Mrs. Behn's Biography a Fiction

BY

ERNEST BERNBAUM

ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

[Reprinted from the *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, XXVIII, 3.]

THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

1913

ENGLISH
DEPARTMENT

XVI.—MRS. BEHN'S BIOGRAPHY A FICTION

The personal history of Mrs. Behn, commonly called the first Englishwoman to earn her livelihood by authorship, has long been regarded as unusually interesting. The daughter of a barber named John Johnson, she was baptized at Wye, Kent, 10 July, 1640.[1] She was buried in London, 20 April, 1689.[2] We find that her career, as generally related, falls into three principal episodes. (1) With a relative whom in *Oroonoko* she calls her father, and who was appointed lieutenant-governor of Surinam, she went to that colony, where she met the royal slave who is the hero of her story, and where she remained until about 1658. (2) She married a London merchant of Dutch extraction, named Behn, but was widowed by 1666. (3) In the latter part of 1666, while acting as a political agent at Antwerp, she gained, through a Dutch lover of hers named Vander Albert, early information of the famous raid by De Ruyter on the English ships in the Thames and Medway; but her timely warning was ridiculed by the British government officials, and she retired from the secret service to devote herself to literature. Momentary doubts whether these data are not in some particulars inaccurate have occasionally been expressed during the last sixty years; but the suspicions,

[1] Note in the handwriting of Lady Winchelsea (which, as it alludes to the *Life and Memoirs of Mrs. Behn*, must have been made in or after 1696), and parish register of Wye,—both reported by Edmund Gosse in *Athenæum*, 6 September, 1884.

[2] *Westminster Abbey Registers* (1876), p. 223, n. 2.

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never very strong, have always quickly died away.[1] The story as outlined above has been substantially accepted and retold, not only by the compilers of popular works of reference, but by scholars like Walter Raleigh, Richard Garnett, W. H. Hudson, H. S. Canby, and Miss C. E. Morgan, as well as by those who have made a special study of Mrs. Behn,—namely Edmund Gosse, P. Siegel, and E. A. Baker.[2]

All biographers who have recounted the three above-stated episodes drew their information directly or indirectly from two sources,—(1) the autobiographical statements in Mrs. Behn's *Oroonoko* and *The Fair Jilt* (1688), and (2) *The Life and Memoirs of Mrs. Behn* (1696).[3] The absolute untrustworthiness of the first of these sources

[1] H. J. Rose, *New General Biographical Dictionary*, IV (1848), p. 10.—*Notes and Queries*, 3rd Ser., III (1863), p. 368; 6th Ser., X (1884), p. 244; 8th Ser., I (1892), p. 145.—Mrs. M. A. E. Green, Preface to *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic, 1666–1667*, (1864), p. xxviii.—J. L. Chester, *Westminster Abbey Registers* (1876), p. 223, n. 2.—P. Siegel, in *Anglia*, XXV (1902), pp. 87 and 90.

[2] Julia Kavanagh, *English Women of Letters* (1862), pp. 4-13.—Edmund Gosse, in *Dictionary of National Biography*, IV (1885), pp. 129-131; and in second edition, II (1908), pp. 130 ff.—Walter Raleigh, *The English Novel*, 5th ed. (1906), pp. 107-109.—Richard Garnett, *The Age of Dryden*, (1895), pp. 146-147.—W. H. Hudson, *Idle Hours in a Library* (1897), pp. 155-157.—André Lichtenberger, *Le Socialisme Utopique* (1898), pp. 8-12.—P. Siegel, *Aphra Behn's Gedichte und Prosawerke*, *Anglia*, XXV (1902), pp. 86 ff. (praised by Miss Morgan (p. 75) for its "careful and adequate treatment").—*Chambers's Encyclopedia*, II (1902), pp. 68.—E. A. Baker, Introduction to *The Novels of Mrs. Aphra Behn* (1905).—H. S. Canby, *The Short Story in English* (1909), pp. 163-167.—*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 11th ed., III (1910), p. 657.—Charlotte E. Morgan, *The Rise of the Novel of Manners* (1911), pp. 75 ff.—*The Cambridge History of English Literature*, VII (1912), pp. 159-161.

[3] Edward Arber, *The Term Catalogues*, II (1905), pp. 230 and 578.—Cf. *Dict. Nat. Biog.*, II (1908), p. 131.

has recently been revealed, however, by the discovery that Mrs. Behn in *Oroonoko* deliberately and circumstantially lied. No relation of hers was appointed lieutenant-general of Surinam; her description of the colony was stolen from George Warren's *Impartial Description of Surinam;* and the events in which she says she participated were imaginary.[1]

On turning to *The Fair Jilt,* one finds matter for suspicion. Mrs. Behn tells us that the events therein related aroused great public excitement in Antwerp about 1666, and that she is giving us the true name of the hero; but history knows no such personage as her "Prince Tarquin, of the race of the last kings of Rome," who entered into a notorious marriage, became involved in crime, and made a sensational escape from public execution in full view of thousands of people. This short melodramatic romance has not even such touches of second-hand realism as appear in *Oroonoko,* yet it is as earnestly vouched for by Mrs. Behn,[2] that observant eye-witness, who kept "journal observations."[3] It is in the midst of this fanciful story that we come upon its only autbiographic remark,—that Mrs. Behn was sent to Antwerp by King Charles in 1665 or 1666. Of course we may not deny offhand the truth of that assertion; but in view of Mrs. Behn's frequent

[1] Ernest Bernbaum, *Mrs. Behn's Oroonoko,* in the *George Lyman Kittredge Anniversary Papers* (1913), pp. 419-433.

[2] On the conventional character of authors' declarations of veracity, see A. J. Tieje *A Peculiar Phase of the Theory of Realism in Pre-Richardsonian Fiction,* in *Publ. Mod. Lang. Ass. of Am.,* XXVIII (1913), pp. 213 ff. Their presence is, however, no proof of fiction; for of course veracious historians may and do make similar declarations.

[3] *The Fair Jilt,* in Mrs. Behn's *Plays, Histories and Novels,* ed. John Pearson (1871), v, pp. 205, 243, 263.

falsehoods in *Oroonoko,* we cannot accept it on her uncorroborated word. Does there exist any reliable evidence to support it?

Seven years after Mrs. Behn's death, Charles Gildon issued her play, *The Younger Brother,* and prefixed to it *An Account of the Life of the Incomparable Mrs. Behn.* In this two and a half page document, her first biography, is the following passage:

> She married Mr. Behn, an eminent merchant, and in the time of the Dutch war grew to such an esteem for wit, nay and judgment too, and which is more uncommon in the fair sex—secrecy and management of public affairs,—that she was employed by King Charles the Second in several negotiations in Flanders which required industry and caution, and which she quitted with all the applause success could gain a beautiful woman in the heart of a king that had always a peculiar value for that sex. How grateful he was, or whether her service made his satisfaction extend to a reward, I have forgot.

Though this statement is much more wordy than Mrs. Behn's in *The Fair Jilt,*[1] it is only a little less vague. In a very specific and detailed form, however, the story reappears the same year (1696), again under the auspices of Gildon, in the second of the two sources of biographic information,—the *Life and Memoirs,* "written by one of the fair sex."[2] Here for the first time we are told

[1] P. 243. She tells us that for six years after the last year of King Charles's banishment (1659-1660), Prince Tarquin travelled "up and down the world, and then arrived at Antwerp, about the time of my being sent there by King Charles."

[2] *The Histories and Novels of Mrs. Behn . . . And Love Letters never before printed: together with the Life of Mrs. Behn, written by one of the Fair Sex* (1696). Recorded in the *Term Catalogues,* II, 578. This is apparently the first edition. A "fifth" is in the British Museum, and like the "eighth" (reprinted in 1871 by John Pearson, and referred to in this paper), it contains a dedication signed "Charles Gildon."

of the Dutch lover Vander Albert apprising Mrs. Behn of the coming attack on the Thames fleet; and here we find in general such circumstantiality of narration as permits investigation of its truth. Indeed, since Mrs. Behn's autobiographic remarks are untrustworthy, the problem of her true biography reduces itself to the question whether the *Life and Memoirs* is authentic.

Fifty-five of its seventy three pages contain comic and sentimental incidents, mostly related in letters. These are mere appendages to the principal episodes of Mrs. Behn's career, and their credibility depends upon that of the latter. Our hopes of gaining true information on the principal points, are raised by the engaging assurance of the "fair" author: "I knew her [Mrs. Behn] intimately well." But it soon strikes us as singular that, though she elaborates with considerable fullness on those episodes which had already been briefly mentioned by Mrs. Behn herself or by Gildon, she gives no entirely new facts of importance. There remain periods in Mrs. Behn's life which are apparently as unknown to this bosom friend as they are to us. Again, though she avers that Mrs. Behn had no secrets from her, she was not advised of the fictitious character of Mrs. Behn's pretended journey to Surinam, but repeats with almost verbal fidelity what was fabled about that adventure in *Oroonoko*. Even if we assume that like the rest of the world she was imposed upon by a plausible story, it is rather strange that she, a woman, should so decidedly underestimate Aphara's [1] age. She insists that

[1] "Aphara" sems to me the proper spelling. It appears thus in Mrs. Behn's letters in the State Papers, in her petitions to the king, and on her gravestone. The baptismal register has "Ayfara." The title-pages of her works during her lifetime usually have "Mrs. A. Behn."

Aphara could not have been in love with Oroonoko because she was hardly more than a child at the time. As a matter of fact, the historical allusions in *Oroonoko* are to the years 1665 and 1666, when Aphara was between 25 and 26.[1] Evidently this biographer is not only credulous but inaccurate.

Another and more serious chronological discrepancy, created by Mrs. Behn's falsehoods, went unperceived by the author of the *Life and Memoirs,* and has been ignored to our own day. Had Aphara really participated in the events recorded in *Oroonoko,* she must have been in Surinam at least as late as December, 1665, and probably a few months later. Yet in *The Fair Jilt* she intimates that she arrived in Antwerp about 1665 or 1666, and the author of the *Life and Memoirs* places the Vander Albert negotiations "the latter end of the year 1666."[2] Thus in the interval between December, 1665, and "the latter end of 1666," Aphara is supposed to have returned from Surinam to London, married Mr. Behn, become a widow, and commenced her secret service! To-day we know that she never was in Surinam; but this does not alter the fact that a biographer who believed that she had been there, and who was not made suspicious by the remarkably improbable celerity of events which that would involve, had evidently no regard for chronology and can hardly be considered a sufficiently careful historian.

Though the *Life and Memoirs* credulously accepts the Surinam episode, and blunders in matters of chronology, it may nevertheless furnish fairly reliable information about Mrs. Behn's secret service in Antwerp. Vivid and

[1] *Life and Memoirs,* pp. 2-4.—*Kittredge Anniversary Papers,* p. 422.
[2] *The Fair Jilt,* p. 243.—*Life and Memoirs,* p. 8.

specific as the account of this adventure is, however, it will not bear thorough scrutiny. It falls into two parts,—Mrs. Behn's discovery of the Dutch project, and her return to England. "Astrea," we are told, "proceeded in her journey to Ostend and Dunkirk, where, with Sir Bernard Gascoigne and others, she took shipping to England." [1] Gascoigne, a soldier, diplomat, and virtuoso, was a person of sufficient consequence to have the fact of his arrival communicated to the office of the Secretary of State. Consequently we know that he reached Dover, 1 May (O. S.), 1667.[2] It is a well established fact, to which I shall revert below, that the Dutch did not plan their sudden attack until the peace negotiations at Breda were developing to their dissatisfaction. As those negotiations did not even begin until May,[3] it is obvious that if Mrs. Behn advised her government of the coming danger, she could not have returned home at the same time as Sir Bernard Gascoigne. If, on the other hand, she did return with him, she could not have sent the warning. The two parts of the episode are quite incompatible.

Taken by itself, the Gascoigne incident is untrustworthy. We are asked to believe that through one of Sir Bernard's marvelous telescopes the travelers saw floating upon the Channel "a four-square floor of various colored marble, from which ascended rows of fluted and twisted pillars, embossed round with climbing vines and flowers and waving streamers that received an easy motion from the air; upon the pillars a hundred little cupids clambered with

[1] *The Fair Jilt*, p. 38.

[2] *State Papers, 1667*, p. 67.

[3] *State Papers, 1667*, p. 108.—Gilby reports to Williamson the arrival of a letter from Amsterdam, dated May 10/20, stating that the treaty at Breda is beginning.

fluttering wings." "I have often," says the biographer, "heard her [Mrs. Behn] assert that the whole company saw it." This absurd phantom, after approaching the ship very closely, was followed by "so violent a storm that, having driven the ship upon the coasts, she split in sight of land; but the people by the help of the inhabitants and boats from the shore were all saved, and our Astrea arrived safe, though tired, to London." [1] It happens that the fleet with which Sir Bernard sailed did meet with a storm, the violence of which was doubtless exaggerated in the news-reports of the time; but it is a matter of record that the ship he was in was not wrecked.[2] In short, the account of Mrs. Behn's homeward journey is incredible.

We have reached a point where all that we can consider possibly authentic in the *Life and Memoirs* is Mrs. Behn's discovery of the Dutch project, which according to her biographer took place in the following way. After Charles II had opened peace negotiations, and carelessly weakened his fleet, Cornelius de Witt and De Ruyter proposed that the Dutch raid the English men-of-war in the Thames. Some treacherous English ministers assured the Dutch that they would meet with no opposition. Having discovered these state secrets, Vander Albert, the lover of Mrs. Behn, journeyed "the latter end of 1666" from Utrecht to Antwerp and revealed them to her. She at once notified one of the English ministers, but he contemned her information, and allowed her letter to be derisively bandied about. Presently a friend apprised her of the ridicule her efforts had met with, and suggested she employ her pen on her amorous adventures rather than on

[1] *Life and Memoirs*, pp. 39-40.
[2] *State Papers, 1667*, pp. 76 and 72.

unappreciated political intelligence. Soon thereafter, when the Dutch descended upon the Thames and Medway, Mrs. Behn had the satisfaction of seeing her warning come true.[1]

In this interesting story, some mistakes are at once apparent. It was not Cornelius de Witt, but his brother John, the famous Grand Pensionary of Holland, who proposed the expedition.[2] The statement that "some ministers about the King" assured the Dutch that there would be no opposition, cannot be substantiated. But these are details which might be rejected without impairing the veracity of the account as a whole.

We shall recognize its general character only if we look carefully at the true history of Holland and England just before the descent on the Medway. The disastrous resolution to lower the efficiency of the English fleet was not taken until February, 1667.[3] Then and during the following months the English knew perfectly well that the Dutch fleet might attack the coast anywhere at any moment; yet, though from time to time they strengthened their fortifications in many parts of the country,[4] they steadily pursued the policy of withdrawing men-of-war from commission. They expected the negotiations begun at Breda in the middle of May to bring peace speedily. After the envoys had been treating for some time, the Dutch found the English demands too truculent and ex-

[1] *Life and Memoirs*, pp. 8-10.

[2] G. A. Lefèvre Pontalis, *Jean de Witt*, I (1884), p. 400.—P. J. Blok, *Geschiedenis van het Nederlandsche Volk*, V (1902), p. 223.

[3] J. R. Tanner, *The Administration of the Navy from the Restoration to the Revolution*, *English Historical Review*, XII (1897), p. 39.

[4] Among the many orders issued is one for the protection of the ships in the Medway, 25 March. *State Papers, 1666–1667*, pp. 586 and xxxi.

cessive to be tolerable. Not until then did John de Witt determine to bring matters to a head by a quick and surprising attack.[1]

His ability to keep such an expedition secret had been remarkably well proved in the seizure of the British African possessions the year before;[2] and in the case that concerns us here he took equally careful precautions. Not even the French ambassador D'Estrades, usually fully informed, was allowed to learn of this project.[3] De Witt did not wish the States General themselves to know of the plan, but laid it before a small naval committee, which had not until 12 May been empowered to act on such matters, and which probably was not asked to authorize the expedition until the eve of its departure 14 June.[4] That the secret of its destination was betrayed to the English is antecedently improbable.

The march of events demonstrates in many ways the English ignorance of De Witt's plan. The State Papers of the time will be searched in vain for any previous warning of the attack on the Thames and Medway. As late as the first week in June, the policy of weakening the navy was still being pursued, not only at Portsmouth and Dover but at Chatham,[5]—the very region the Dutch were to fall upon. Of course England quickly knew that the Dutch fleet had sailed;[6] and if the authorities had

[1] Lefèvre Pontalis, *De Witt*, I, p. 400.—Blok, *Nederlandsche Volk*, V, p. 223.—As a possibility, an attack upon the Thames had long been in De Witt's mind; but the question here is when he definitely determined upon this particular expedition.

[2] Lefèvre Pontalis, I, pp. 329-330.

[3] Blok, V, p. 223.

[4] Lefèvre Pontalis, I, p. 401.—Blok, V, p. 223.

[5] *State Papers, 1667*, 29 May (O. S.), pp. 130-131.

[6] *State Papers, 1667*, 19 May, 23 May; pp. 108 and 116.

ever been informed by a spy that the enemy intended to attack the Thames squadron, however they might previously have derided the warning, they surely would now have acted in accordance with a recognition of its credibility. But nothing is clearer from the reports and orders they issued in June, 1667, than that they had no intimation of just where the blow was to be expected. The Secretary of State, Lord Arlington, was directing that vigilance be exercised throughout the southern and eastern maritime counties, but was evidently unable to give any suggestion as to what part of the extensive coastline was in especial danger.[1] Had the government known what to expect it would have massed its forces on the banks of the Thames and Medway, instead of which we find them sent not only thither but also to Harwich, Portsmouth, the Isle of Wight, Weymouth, and Portland.[2] As late as 18 June, Naval Commissioner Coventry declares it "as yet uncertain what is the enemy's design."[3] It was the progress of the Dutch fleet up the Thames, and not any previous intelligence, that revealed the bold purpose, one which never could have been so brilliantly achieved if the defenders had had even one week's warning of its precise character.

Secrecy and speed on the part of the Dutch, bewildered ignorance on the part of the English,—these are the historic circumstances of the affair. A slowly maturing plan, betrayed and communicated to the English a considerable time before its execution,—conditions directly contrary to the real ones,—are assumed in the story first "divulged," thirty years after the event, by Mrs. Behn's biographer.

[1] *Ibid.*, 29 May, pp. 130 and xii-xiii.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. xvi.
[3] *Ibid.*, 8 June (O. S.), p. 158.

It is manifestly a tissue of inaccuracies, improbabilities, and falsehoods.

II

Modern writers on Mrs. Behn have placed such confidence in the *Life and Memoirs* that they have not troubled to look elsewhere for possible records of her political service. Yet in the *Calendar of State Papers of Charles II* there have been readily accessible during the last fifty years seventeen genuine letters written by or to Mrs. Behn. Though few in number, they (unlike the *Life and Memoirs*) authentically prove that she was indeed a political agent at Antwerp, and they give us a fair view of her real activities there.[1]

To understand these we must revert to a different aspect of the Dutch war than that presented in the *Life and Memoirs,* and to a period nearly a year earlier than the descent on the Medway. It was in August, 1666, that Mrs. Behn was sent to Antwerp.[2] Her special duty there was not to discover and report the naval news of Holland (though in the course of her correspondence she not infrequently did so), but to learn what she could about those Englishmen in Holland who, like the famous Algernon Sydney, displeased with the government of Charles II, were plotting against it, holding treasonable correspondence

[1] *State Papers, 1666–1667*, pp. 44, 72, 82, 97, 118, 125, 135, 142, 145, 146, 156, 157, 236, 371.—Of these seventeen letters, eleven are written by Mrs. Behn, the others by her correspondent, William Scott.

[2] In her first letter (16 August), she says she sailed with Sir Anthony Desmarces. He was at Margate 25 July and at Bruges 7 August. These dates are presumably O. S.—*State Papers, 1665–1666*, p. 576; *Ibid., 1666–1667*, pp. 17 and 44.

with disloyal subjects in England, and even actively aiding the Dutch enemies of their native country. At Rotterdam one of these exiled adventurers, Colonel Bamfield, commanded an English regiment in the Dutch service; and it was with an officer of this regiment, William Scott, that Mrs. Behn particularly desired to establish communication. William Scott's father, Thomas, one of the regicides, had been executed at the Restoration, and in the spring of 1666 William himself had been officially commanded to return to England;[1] but he dared not face a government evidently ill pleased with his conduct. It seems, however, that he was now prepared to re-establish his loyalty by acting as a spy among the English in Holland, provided he should receive the reward of a pardon as well as money.[2]

In her first letter to the London authorities, Mrs. Behn reports that she has succeeded in persuading Scott to begin his service,—a service so hazardous that in describing her meeting with Scott, she mentions "taking a coach and going a day's journey with him for an opportunity of speaking to him." "Though at first shy," she adds, "he became by arguments extremely willing to undertake the service."[3] But some two weeks later, when he came to Antwerp again, he insisted that he must have his official pardon if he was to continue informer; and Mrs. Behn wrote to Tom Killegrew, the king's favorite, begging him to obtain it.[4] There-

[1] *State Papers, 1665–1666*, p. 318.—A curious list of duties to be performed by Dutch spies in England (*Ibid., 1666–1667*, p. 427) includes "to communicate with Scott's brother-in-law and correspondent."

[2] *Ibid., 1666–1667*, p. 82.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 44.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 82. It may be recalled that Mrs. Behn's *The Rover* is based on Killegrew's *Thomaso the Wanderer*.

after, for about four weeks, though the pardon was exasperatingly delayed, Scott, as "Celadon," wrote in cypher from Rotterdam to "Astrea" [1] at Antwerp; and she forwarded his news to London.

The news was of all sorts some of it concerning the Dutch navy. But the only approach to any warning of an attack by the Dutch is found in the following remark by Scott: "They pretend no design to land in England, but are really eager after such a thing if they can gain the help of the fanatics" [*i. e., the* disloyal dissenters].[2] Most of the allusions to the Dutch fleet are in the nature of suggestions that if the English will attack it now they will be successful.[3] Moreover, the characteristic and apparently the most appreciated portion of the correspondence,—bearing information which Scott had exceptional opportunities of obtaining,—communicates the activities of the English malcontents at Rotterdam, and the schemes of their London sympathizers, at least one of whom owed his detection and imprisonment to this spy system.[4]

Though the system for some time worked smoothly enough, Mrs. Behn was not without anxieties. She was much annoyed by the inquisitiveness and hostility of a rival English political agent in Antwerp, "an unsufferable, scandalous, lying, prating fellow," who, "not being able to find out her business, abuses and threatens to kill Scott, and writes to everybody in Holland that Scott visits her." She urges that "his tongue should be clipped." [5] But this

[1] Thus the exigencies of political service, and not literary affectation, gave rise to this well known name of Mrs. Behn.

[2] *State Papers, 1666–1667*, p. 146. This was written in September, 1666.

[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 118, 125, 135, 156.

[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 82, 118, 135, 146.

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 145 and 136. Cf. pp. xxvii-xxviii and 82.

difficulty was almost comic in comparison wtih the distressing failure of the government to provide her and Scott with sufficient funds. The forty pounds she brought with her were soon expended, and she needed money to pay for her living expenses, Scott's services, and the messengers between them. On one occasion she could pay the latter only by pawning her ring. She apologetically explained to Killegrew why she sent a mere servant for money; "her mother was not fit to come for it, and Sir Thomas is seldom in town."[1] Nearly all her letters from Antwerp are begging ones; and in London, almost two years later, she was still petitioning the king for her dues, and writing to Killegrew as follows:

> I must go to prison tomorrow if I have not the money tonight; they [her creditors] say I am dallied with, and will not allow a few days more. I would break through all, get to the King, and never rise till he had paid me the money, but am too sick and weak. I will send my mother to the king with a petition, and not perish in a prison, whence he [a creditor with a claim of £150] swears I shall not stir till I have paid the uttermost farthing. If I have not the money tonight, you must send me something to keep me in prison, for I will not starve.

Even this pathetic appeal seems to have been futile, for a subsequent petition, the last record of this episode, is written from prison.[2] The niggardly policy that wrecked so many efforts, small and great, to serve Charles II, was what starved the promising enterprise of Mrs. Behn at Antwerp. In September and October 1666, Scott sent information regularly; then the reports cease; and by November it transpires that he is imprisoned,—apparently

[1] *Ibid.*, pp. 44, 72, 135.

[2] *State Papers, 1668–1669*, p. 127.—Cf. *Notes and Queries*, 2nd Ser., VIII (1859), pp. 265-266.

not as a spy but as a poor debtor.[1] By January, 1667, Mrs. Behn, almost "wild with her hard treatment," had abandoned her service and set out for home.[2]

III

Having ascertained these facts, we are all the more certain of the untrustworthy character of the *Life and Memoirs*.[3] It says that her negotiations were with one Vander Albert, a Dutch traitor from Utrecht, but we have found that they were with an English spy from Rotterdam. It tells with great circumstantiality that Vander Albert supplied her with information because he was in love with her. No one who knows Mrs. Behn and the manners of her age will suppose that, if such had been the nature of her power over her informant, she would have hesitated to state the fact frankly; but, as we have seen, what Scott expected to gain through her was money and his pardon. It is also clear from her first to her last letter,

[1] *State Papers, 1666–1667*, p. 236.—Had spying been the ground of his arrest, we should hardly learn that, as Mrs. Behn writes in December (p. 371), "he will have his liberty in a few days."

[2] Mrs. M. A. E. Green, in the preface to the *State Papers, 1666–1667*, p. xxviii, says Mrs. Behn returned in December; but her last letter is dated 26 December,—O. S.

[3] We likewise ascertain that Mrs. Behn's only autobiographic assertion in *The Fair Jilt*,—that she was sent to Antwerp in 1665 or 1666,—is not a falsehood. But on the same grounds the story itself proves fictitious: for she was there only five months, and the adventures of Tarquin, which she says occurred during her stay, can hardly have covered a period of less than one year, his imprisonment alone lasting over six months (p. 275). The length of her stay in Antwerp assumed in the *Life and Memoirs* is also impossibly long.

that she had no other informant than Scott, whose arrest made her no longer serviceable to the government. Finally, the date of her actual departure from Antwerp makes it quite impossible for her to have gained knowledge of the design against the Thames ships.

The author of the *Life and Memoirs,* basing its fictions on her autobiographic remarks in *Oroonoko* and *The Fair Jilt,* and not knowing the true facts, felt obliged to invent, regarding her stay in Flanders, as interesting incidents as conceivable. At that time (1696), thirty years after the Dutch war, its best remembered event was the sensational and dramatic attack on the Thames; and to associate Mrs. Behn's political services therewith was both natural and expedient. To eke out the slender materials, amorous letters and episodes were fabricated. If we had found them in a work whose testable statements proved true, we might hesitate to declare them forged; but when we see them appear in a work of precisely the contrary character their pronounced resemblance to the usual French and English love letters and stories of the time [1] becomes of decided significance, and leads us to recognize them too as fictitious.

It was Charles Gildon who wrote the *Account of Mrs. Behn,* and he who issued the volume of her stories in which the *Life and Memoirs* " by one of the fair sex " appears. Though he affects intimate acquaintance with Mrs. Behn, he can hardly have known her at all until near the end of her life, for he did not come to London until he was twenty-one,[2] in 1686, and she died 16 April, 1689. His

[1] Cf. C. E. Morgan, *The Rise of the Novel of Manners* (1911), pp. 76-77.

[2] *Lives and Characters of the English Dramatic Poets, . . . first begun by Mr. Langbain, improved . . . by a careful hand* [Charles Gildon] (1698), p. 174.

associations and activities before 1696 were not the most respectable. His first book was *The History of the Athenian Society* (1691), " by a gentlemen who got secret intelligence of their whole proceedings." He wrote it for that wily rogue, John Dunton, who was quite capable of teaching a pliant youth all the tricks of Grub Street.[1] A thoroughly dishonest book, it makes Dunton's own journalistic enterprise, *The Athenian Gazette,* appear the public-spirited labors of a learned society. It ascribes to this society some imaginary members, professes to get its " secret intelligence " (really obtained from Dunton) from a mysterious " C. B." among them, and is furnished with a dedication signed " R. L." but apparently written either by Dunton or by Gildon himself.[2] In the same year (1691), Gildon wrote, likewise for Dunton, *The Post Boy Robbed of his Mail,* five hundred letters supposed to be sent to " persons of several qualities,"—a kind of fictitious composition which he found successful, for a second volume was issued in 1693.[3] He furthered the sale of another series of letters, " by several gentlemen and ladies,"—some of them love letters, and all of them doubtless composed by himself,—by conspicuously printing on the title-page the names of eminent authors to whom they were nominally addressed.[4] In his *Miscellany Poems* (1692) and *Chorus Poetarum* (1694), he ascribed to poets like Spenser and

[1] Cf. C. N. Greenough, *John Dunton's Letters from New England, Publications of tht Colonial Society of Massachusetts,* XIV (1912), pp. 213-257.

[2] Cf. H. R. Steeves, *The Athenian Virtuosi and the Athenian Society, Modern Language Review,* VII (1912), pp. 358-371.

[3] *Term Catalogues,* II, p. 466.

[4] *Miscellaneous Letters and Essays . . . directed to John Dryden, Esq., . . . Mr. Dennis, Mr. Congreve,* etc. (1694).

Milton verses which they certainly did not write.[1] He attached himself to the sensational Charles Blount, and, whether officially appointed or not, acted for that half-respectable, half-notorious radical as a sort of literary executor.[2]

When in 1696 Southerne's *Oroonoko* gained its great success, Gildon seized the opportunity to issue works by Mrs. Behn;[3] and, in view of his former literary irregularities at which we have glanced, we are not surprised to find that the biographical accounts prefixed to them prove to be untrustworthy. It is a suspicious circumstance that after Gildon had remarked in the *Account* "To draw her to the life, one must write like her that is, with all the softness of her sex and all the fire of ours," he should straightway have found "one of the fair sex" to contribute the *Life and Memoirs* to his edition of Mrs. Behn's stories. If he actually was so fortunate as to discover "one of the fair sex" who knew Mrs. Behn as familiarly as she alleges, he must have taught her his own trtcky manner of authorship, and she must have rejected all the true facts she knew in favor of the false ones she wrote. The simpler conjecture is, of course, that Gildon wrote the *Life and Memoirs* himself.

In testing the reliability of Gildon and the *Life and Memoirs* I have necessarily confined myself to those particulars to which a test of authenticity can be safely

[1] *Miscellany Poems*, p. 29.—*Chorus Poetarum*, p. 172.

[2] Prefaces to Charles Blount's *Oracles of Reason* (1693) and *Miscellaneous Works* (1695).

[3] Southerne's play is alluded to in Gildon's *Account*.—Was Gildon the unidentified "G. J., her friend" who in 1690 issued Mrs. Behn's *The Widow Ranter* and prefixed to it a prologue identical with Dryden's to Shadwell's *A True Widow*?

applied. Since in such cases fabrication invariably appears, it follows that no reliance may be placed in those where verification is impossible. For example, we cannot accept Gildon's assertion that Mrs. Behn was "able to write in the midst of company, and yet have her share of the conversation, which I saw her do in writing *Oroonoko* and other parts of the following volume."[1] We must preserve the same sceptical attitude on being told that Mrs. Behn, after returning from Surinam, "gave King Charles II so pleasant and rational an account of his affairs there, and particularly of the misfortunes of Oroonoko, that he desired her to deliver them publicly to the world."[2] Of course it is unlikely that she would have ventured to recount to the king her imaginary voyage to his colony (which, as a matter of fact, is an unflattering rather than a "pleasant" account); and it is almost certain that if he had asked her to publish the story she would have eagerly done so at once, and dedicated it to him.[3] But wholly apart from such considerations, and sufficient in itself, is the fact that this incident is told by that thoroughly discreditable witness, the author of the *Life and Memoirs.* In the absence of confirmatory evidence, such interesting glimpses of Mrs. Behn's life and character, repeated in most modern biographies, can unfortunately no longer be believed true.

Indeed, what we can at present be truly said to know

[1] Gildon, Epistle Dedicatory to Mrs. Behn's *Histories and Novels, Works* (1871), v, p. xi. Cf. the last page of Gildon's *Account.*

[2] *Life and Memoirs* pp. 4-5. Is this a fanciful development of Southerne's statement (Epistle Dedicatory to *Oroonoko,* 1696): "I remember what I have heard from a friend of hers, that she always told his [Oroonoko's] story more feelingly that she writ it"?

[3] Cf. P. Siegel, *Anglia,* xxv, p. 98.

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concerning Mrs. Behn's career is very little. The names, of her parents, their humble station, the date and place of her baptism,—these are all the data we have of the first twenty-six years of her life. We do not even surely know that she was married to a Mr. Behn.[1] The only episode of which considerable details are preserved is that which I have outlined above,—her six months' secret service in Antwerp in 1666, followed by her imprisonment for debt in 1668. In 1671 she began to write for the stage; but even thereafter such meagre contemporary notices as we find of her are critical rather than biographical. The proportionally large amount by which we must reduce our supposed knowledge may perhaps be best summed up in saying that everything except the opening sentences in the long first paragraph[2] of her life in the *Dictionary of National Biography* should be struck out as unauthentic.

The apparent loss is, however counterbalanced by not unwelcome gains. We shall henceforth entertain fewer misconceptions about the effect of Mrs. Behn's personal experiences on her art. Had it been previously known that the Antwerp love letters in the *Life and Memoirs* are fictitious, Professor Siegel would not have attributed the frequent presence in Mrs. Behn's works of old stingy lovers to her affair with the amorous Van Bruin. Nor would Mr. E. A. Baker have said: "She drew upon her Dutch experiences in describing the boorish Haunce von Ezel."[3] The influence worked in just the opposite direction: the

[1] Cf. the marriage registers published by the Harleian Society, and J. L. Chester's sceptical comment in *Westminster Abbey Registers*, p. 223, n.

[2] The other paragraphs are almost wholly critical and bibliographic.

[3] P. Siegel, *Anglia*, xxv, p. 93.—E. A. Baker, Introduction to *The Novels of Mrs. Aphra Behn*, p. xii.

lovers in the *Life and Memoirs* resemble those which her biographers had observed in her works. As for Mrs. Behn herself, we see how far short she fell of being a genuine "realist" when she could neglect her own decidedly interesting adventures in Flanders to write instead of the heroic Prince Tarquin.

A more important gain than this correction of the prevailing estimates of Mrs. Behn's works, is that which accrues to the history of the novel in the second half of the seventeenth century. The more worthless the *Life and Memoirs* as a biographical document, the greater its value for the history of fiction. In *The Counterfeit Lady* (1673), as I have shown elsewhere,[1] we have already the nucleus of a group of works which profess to be biographic but are really fictitious, and which anticipate the method of Defoe. To this group, small but highly important in its bearing on the origin of the modern novel, may now be added the *Life and Memoirs of Mrs. Behn.* The probabilities are that future research will reveal a whole school of such fiction masquerading as fact.

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[1] *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America,* XXVI (1911), p. xxviii. The full results of the study there summarized I expect to publish shortly.

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